

HOMELAND SECURITY

Lawmakers Strike A Deal To Check Fertilizer Purchases

Individuals wanting to buy ammonium nitrate would have to wait for up to 72 hours while they are checked against terrorist watch lists and the government would have to resolve most appeals from would-be buyers in a similar time period, under an agreement reached Tuesday by members of the House Homeland Security Committee.

The agreement, which would allow the government to take longer in cases that have national security implications, will be offered Thursday by Rep. **Dan Lungren**, R-Calif., as an amendment to a bill aimed at increasing security in the purchasing and handling of the chemical compound, a common fertilizer that also can be used to create high-impact explosives.

"This compromise gives us everything we were pushing for. It's a very strong step, a common-sense provision that could end up saving thousands of lives," said House Homeland Security ranking member **Peter King**, R-N.Y.

Democrats postponed an April 18 markup of the bill after Lungren introduced a similar amendment. The postponement and subsequent behind-the-scenes negotiations represented a rare procedural victory for Republicans in the minority.

"Maybe I'm too simple on this, but I would just say this: If it turns out that someone gets a [registration] number, they purchase ammonium nitrate, they carry out a terrorist attack and they were on the watch list, what answer are we going to give?" Lungren asked at the time.

Last week marked 12 years since ammonium nitrate was used in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Last June, Canadian authorities arrested 17 individuals who were allegedly plotting to blow up buildings using three tons of ammonium nitrate.

Republicans also pointed out that airline passengers are checked against watch lists before being allowed to board planes. Democrats said they were concerned that the watch lists contain errors that might inadvertently prevent small farmers from getting ammonium nitrate needed to fertilize crops.

"The problem we've got here is that nobody has confidence in the watch list because there are so many names," said Rep. **Norman Dicks**, D-Wash.

"The problem is, what do we do with this poor farmer who's got his crop out there, he's going to grow this crop and he has to have the fertilizer and his name shows up on this list as a mistake?" Dicks asked. "How do we work out some way to protect that individual? You don't want your farmer not to be able to plant his crops."

But Democrats agreed to support watch list checks after the appeals process was written into the amendment. "All applicants will have to be checked against the terrorist watch list," King said. "And, in case a mistake is made, farmers will be able to have their names cleared within 72 hours. It's a well-thought-out measure that greatly strengthens the bill." *By Chris Strohm*